Indian Independence Day
By Rām Lingam

Independence Day, August 15, commemorates the day in 1947 when India achieved political freedom from British rule. Every year here in Auckland, we have social groups celebrating this day with cultural events and much love for the land we originate from. Of course, India is not the only country who got independence from another country or power. Of the 190 odd countries in the world, there are atleast 142 countries that have Independence Days including the United States of America.

In India, flag-hoisting ceremonies are conducted on this day. The main event takes place in New Delhi, where the Prime Minister hoists the National Flag at the magnificent Red Fort and delivers a nationally televised speech highlighting achievements of the government during the past year and also pays his tribute to leaders of the freedom struggle. This speech is very similar to speeches given by leaders of countries on their Independence Days.

The most common icon we see on Indian Independence Day is the National Tri-colour flag of India with the ‘Ashoka chakra’. This was said to be adopted during a meeting of the Constituent Assembly held on the 22 July 1947, twenty-four days before 15 August 1947. The history of Indian flag dates back to pre-independence era as there were flags of India designed by eminent people like the flag by Sister Nivedita (who was Swami Vivekananda’s Irish disciple) in 1904, Madame Cama’s Flag in1906, the flag of the Indian National Congress etc.

The tri-colour Indian flag has a deep significance and offers life-lessons for any Indian. Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the great philosopher, scholar, statesman and the second president of India described the significance of the Indian flag as follows:

“The saffron colour denotes renunciation or disinterestedness. Our leaders must be indifferent to material gains and dedicate themselves to their work.

The white in the centre is light, the path of truth to guide our conduct.

The green shows our relation to (the) soil, our relation to the plant life here, on which all other life depends.

The "Ashoka Chakra" in the centre of the white is the wheel of the law of dharma. Truth or Satya, dharma or virtue ought to be the controlling principle of those who work under this flag. Again, the wheel denotes motion. There is death in stagnation. There is life in movement. India should no more resist change, it must move and go forward.

The wheel represents the dynamism of a peaceful change."

Generally, on 15th August, tributes are paid to freedom fighters who liberated India from the British. However India’s past is not just 200 years of British rule. Though India had multiple kingdoms before the British came, there was a steady and unified culture along with a continued exchange of people, marketable goods, philosophy etc. This exchange happened quite oblivious of the boundaries of kingdoms.

Despite India being constantly targeted by many invaders be it an Alexander, a Mongol invader like Timur, the Mughals or the British who were envious of India’s material and enduring spiritual wealth, her culture has always been free and quite undeterred. This day could reflect on the
spirit of India which lies in her culture and deep wisdom which has helped people lead a purposeful and harmonious life anywhere in the world ~ a continuous culture that enlightened many thinkers and scholars all over the world.

On this day tributes are paid to the great souls who laid their lives in the freedom struggle and also to remember the vision of the founding fathers for the future generation to reflect upon.

For instance, we might remember the famous ‘Tryst with Destiny’ speech by the first Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru on 15th August 1947 where he focused on aspects that transcend India's history: "At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance..... We end today a period of ill fortune, and India discovers herself again. .....And to India, our much-loved motherland, the ancient, the eternal and the ever-new, we pay our reverent homage and we bind ourselves afresh to her service.” It’s quite significant when Nehru says that India discovers herself “again”.

But one wonders sometimes why we celebrate Independence Day overseas? How is Indian Independence Day important to our kids who are born here or even to Indians who are trying to naturalise and integrate? Is this day, like Independence days of other countries, dedicated to celebrate the birth of a nation?

The answers to these questions could be quite straight forward – it’s because we as humans value freedom and independence. It’s obviously a time to reflect about these taken-for-granted privileges without thanking the people who made it possible. To be independent obviously means to take care of oneself, live the values of a land that nourishes and improves us, to remind ourselves of our deep roots and heritage, making our own rules based on where and how we want to progress and providing for our own needs.

Independence Day is an appropriate time to renew the spirit of the motherland whose glory lies in her past, which runs even today in the form of a continuous civilization. On this day, the discovery of the wisdom and what India offers to the world is something that can be learnt and treasured, only to improve our own lives and become positive contributors to any society, wherever we live.

As Mark Twain once said: “India is the cradle of the human race, the birthplace of human speech, the mother of history, the grandmother of legend, and the great grand mother of tradition. Our most valuable and most constructive materials in the history of man are treasured up in India only.”

Happy Independence Day.